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DE RUEHSG #2210/01 2922016
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
P 192016Z OCT 06
FM AMEMBASSY SANTIAGO
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 0220
INFO RUEHAC/AMEMBASSY ASUNCION PRIORITY 2697
RUEHBR/AMEMBASSY BRASILIA PRIORITY 3352
RUEHBU/AMEMBASSY BUENOS AIRES PRIORITY 3264
RUEHCV/AMEMBASSY CARACAS PRIORITY 1139
RUEHLP/AMEMBASSY LA PAZ OCT 4857
RUEHPE/AMEMBASSY LIMA PRIORITY 4773
RUEHMN/AMEMBASSY MONTEVIDEO PRIORITY 3400

UNCLAS SANTIAGO 002210

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E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [SOCI](#) [CI](#)
SUBJECT: STUDENT PROTESTS FAIL TO GAIN PUBLIC SUPPORT

REF: A. SANTIAGO 1229

[1](#)B. SANTIAGO 1204
[1](#)C. SANTIAGO 2063

Summary

[1](#)1. The latest round of public student protests thus far have failed to garner wide support among the Chilean population, including among the leaders of the May and June student strikes. Unlike the strikes in May and June, these protests have been sporadic, disorganized and mostly non-violent. Some 1,000 students took to the streets in Santiago on October 18, but more than 85 percent of the students attended classes. The firm yet measured response from the police has been well received and reflects Chileans' general aversion to public disorder. In one instance, the police forcibly entered a school, dislodged the students who had taken over the building, and suspended them for the remainder of the academic year. Student leaders have initiated meetings with politicians to press for prompt congressional approval of GOC education proposals once they are introduced.

[1](#)2. President Bachelet defended her administration's short-term achievements and vowed to continue to improve public education. The GOC increased government spending for the 2007 budget by more than 10 percent, with education constituting 15 percent of all public spending. Most Chileans acknowledge the need for fundamental reforms in public education, but have sided with the government in urging students to end the protests. End summary.

Protests

[1](#)3. Several students from public high schools across the nation took to the streets October 16-18 to protest the quality of public education and to call on the government to comply with the agreements reached following the last round of student strikes in May and June (reftels A-B). Some students "seized" schools and barricaded themselves in the classrooms. In one instance that has received considerable press coverage, the police forcibly entered a school and dislodged the students who had taken over the building earlier this week. Local authorities then suspended for the remainder of the academic year the more than 40 students involved in the incident. As of October 18, five public schools remain "seized."

[1](#)4. Unlike the June protests, these have not enjoyed widespread support of the students, parents, or the general

public. Nor were they characterized by the same degree of violence or public disorder. Furthermore, the students are divided and not especially well organized. The end of the school year, and the fear that close to 40 percent of the students would have to repeat the year if they continue to miss classes, has made many students reluctant to join the strikes. Some organizers of the previous student strikes have told the press they do not support these current protests.

Students' Demands

¶5. The students' main demands are:

- Implement the terms of the agreements reached in June;
- Improve the quality of public education;
- Strengthen the Presidential Advisory group (a group of government officials, educators and students that was formed in June to discuss ways to improve public education) so that it has decision-making authority, and includes representatives from the political parties;
- Amend the law governing public high schools to allow for greater student participation in the decisions affecting public schools;
- Revise the nation-wide student college entrance exam (PSU) to eliminate the discrepancy in performance between public and private school students.

¶6. Student leaders are meeting with Concertacion and opposition Alianza political party to press for prompt congressional approval of the GOC's education proposals once they are introduced. They also plan to meet with the Senate Education Committee later in the week.

Government's Reaction

¶7. President Bachelet questioned the students' decision to protest and defended the government's performance, citing the following achievements:

- Appointment of new Ministers of Education and Interior following the May/June strikes;
- Creation of a Presidential Advisory group;
- A ten percent increase in funding for education, with spending on education constituting 15 percent of the overall budget for 2007.
- A study on possible amendments to the education law (LOCE).
- Elimination of registration fees for the college entrance exam for students from the lowest social-economic level.
- An increase by 200,000 in the number of "meal scholarships" for the neediest children.

¶8. Education Minister Provoste, who came on board after the June protests, also criticized the students and noted that the GOC "had created space" for the students to voice their concerns in a peaceful, democratic manner. Prior to the October 18 demonstrations, Santiago city governor Victor Barrueto said that the police would allow the protests to take place, but would not allow "public disorder."

Public Reaction: We Side with the Government

¶9. A review of the editorials written in mainstream press media and comments by academics and politicians shows no support among the general population for this latest round of

protests. While acknowledging that Chile's education system requires fundamental reform, most believe the government has made progress in addressing the main issues since June and that the students -- especially toward the end of the academic year and its all important exams -- should return to class.

Comment

¶10. The public's reaction thus far to this latest round of student protests reflects a growing perception that President Bachelet has taken positive steps since June to address the many problems facing Chile's public education system. Criticism is now being directed toward the student protesters themselves. President Bachelet's strong public statements reflect a confidence that was lacking in June. The firm yet measured response from the police has also been well-received and reflects Chileans' general aversion to public disorder. It may also reflect the tougher law and order approach of new Interior Minister Velasco. Unlike June, when Bachelet departed for Washington and her meeting with President Bush in the midst of the student protests, there were no calls for Bachelet to delay her recent visit to Germany.
KELLY